

# Fighters and Dreamers

The Friendship of Siegfried Sassoon and  
Wilfred Owen: 1917-1919 and Beyond

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**Ramathi Bandaranayake** is a final year student at the Colombo International School, Colombo, Sri Lanka. She is a student of A Level Literature and has been a fan of First World War poetry and novels from a very young age. She believes that reading and studying the anti-war literature that grew out of this period enables us to understand the cruelty and futility of human conflict, and if the message propagated by these works is universally understood, the vast number of unnecessary conflicts and the unimaginable human suffering they engender could perhaps be lessened.

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1917-1919 and Beyond

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*“You have fixed my Life”*

*Wilfred Owen to Siegfried Sassoon, 5<sup>th</sup> November 1917<sup>1</sup>*

*“I had taken an instinctive liking to him, and felt that I could talk  
freely”*

*Siegfried Sassoon on Wilfred Owen<sup>2</sup>*

*To all the “lions led by donkeys”*

*This book is published on 11 November 2013 in commemoration  
of Armistice Day*

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*Ramathi Bandaranayake*  
*Colombo, Sri Lanka*  
*November 2013*

## Biographical Notes



*Figure 1- Wilfred Owen, 1916.*

*This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); ©The English Faculty Library, University of Oxford /*

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**Wilfred Edward Salter Owen MC<sup>3</sup>** (18 March 1893 – 4 November 1918) was an English poet and soldier, one of the leading poets of the First World War. His shocking, realistic war poetry on the horrors of trenches and gas warfare was heavily influenced by

his friend and mentor Siegfried Sassoon, and stood in stark contrast both to the public perception of war at the time and to the confidently patriotic verse written by earlier war poets such as Rupert Brooke. Among his best-known works – most of which were published posthumously – are "Dulce et Decorum Est", "Insensibility", "Anthem for Doomed Youth", "Futility" and "Strange Meeting".



*Figure 1 Siegfried Sassoon (May 1915)  
By George Charles Beresford. Public Domain.*

**Siegfried Loraine Sassoon<sup>4</sup>** CBE, MC (8 September 1886 – 1 September 1967) was an eminent English poet, writer, and soldier. Decorated for bravery on the Western Front, he became one of the leading poets of the First World War. His poetry both described the horrors of the trenches, and satirized the patriotic pretensions of those who, in Sassoon's view, were

responsible for a Jingoism-fuelled war. He later won acclaim for his prose work, notably his three-volume fictionalized autobiography, collectively known as the "Sherston trilogy".

## Introduction “As well as a pleader can”<sup>5</sup>

The First World War represented a revolution in more than one sense. It was the advent of large-scale mechanized warfare, which allowed wholesale slaughter and an unimaginable degree of suffering to take place. Until then, no other conflict had involved so many countries or had such a global impact. The war forever changed perceptions of international relations and diplomacy. However, the revolution also caused an explosion of a new art form- war literature.



*Figure 3- World War I Memorial, Kelvingrove, Glasgow. Image by Tony Shertila. Used with permission.*

War literature was not strictly a “new” art form at the time. It had been in existence long before World War I, but this war significantly expanded its scope. Much powerful and prominent war writing comes from or is based on this period, from Erich Maria Remarque’s “All Quiet on the Western Front” to Robert Graves’ “Goodbye to All That.” Within this genre is a distinct group of its own- the war poets. When one thinks of the poetry of the First World War, the name that comes almost immediately to mind is that of Wilfred Owen, the young soldier-poet killed in the

last week of the war. Instantly, it is followed by that of Siegfried Sassoon, a World War I veteran who survived the conflict. However, these two poets are not two lives in isolation. They were friends, and their friendship had a visible impact on the work they produced.

It was a chance encounter, but a deeply significant one, for a close bond would form between two men who could not have been more different when they met at Craiglockhart War Hospital in August 1917. Sassoon was almost thirty-one, while Owen was just twenty-four. Sassoon was tall, Owen was small. Sassoon was born into a wealthy upper-class family, while Owen was the son of a railway clerk. Sassoon was a Cambridge dropout, but Owen's family could not afford to send him to university. Most importantly, Sassoon was already a published poet who had achieved considerable success with his book *The Old Huntsman and Other Poems*, which included powerful anti-war verses. In contrast, Owen, though a writer of verse, didn't have a single work in print.

The timing of their meeting was most opportune. Sassoon had been declared "insane" and sent to the Hospital in an



attempt to silence and discredit his very public protest against the continuation of the war. Despite having begun the war an author of patriotic, Brooke-like verse such as *Absolution*, his experiences made him disillusioned with the war, which he began to believe was a vainglorious enterprise rather than a honourable defense of a legitimate cause. He also came into contact with prominent pacifists of the day, such as Lady Ottoline Morrell and Bertrand Russell, further fuelling his opposition to the war. The war poems in *The Old Huntsman* chart the progression of his stance from patriot to bitter critic. Poems such as the romantic *To Victory* appear around the beginning of the publication, but their sweetish, sentimental tones are soon lost in the sharpness of *The Kiss*, or the bitter satire of *"They."*

'They' <sup>6</sup>

*The Bishop tells us: 'When the boys come back  
'They will not be the same; for they'll have fought  
'In a just cause: they lead the last attack  
'On Anti-Christ; their comrades' blood has bought  
'New right to breed an honourable race,  
'They have challenged Death and dared him face to  
face.'*

*'We're none of us the same!' the boys reply.  
'For George lost both his legs; and Bill's stone blind;  
'Poor Jim's shot through the lungs and like to die;  
'And Bert's gone syphilitic: you'll not find  
'A chap who's served that hasn't found some change.  
'And the Bishop said: 'The ways of God are strange!'*

This poem is typical of the Sassoon satire. It contains an attack against the attitude of those at home (represented here by the Bishop) who glorify the war but are ignorant of its horror and futility. The pace is rapid with a tightly controlled rhyme scheme, creating a sharp, clipped rhythm that conveys its author's bitterness and anger at the suffering caused by war. The language is brutally blunt and realistic ("lost both his legs," "gone syphilitic"). Sassoon's focus is on stripping away patriotic and romantic notions of war to reveal its true cruelty.

Sassoon finally decided to compose an open letter entitled "Finished With the War: A Soldier's Declaration," renouncing the war and publically refusing to continue serving in it. He hoped to be court-martialed, for his status as a prominent poet and war hero would give publicity to his cause. In further protest, he threw his Military Cross into the River Mersey. It was a very brave move. However, Sassoon's close friend, the poet Robert Graves, feared that Sassoon was martyring himself on a hopeless cause, and managed to get a medical board to declare him insane. Sassoon found himself at Craiglockhart War Hospital under the care of the distinguished Dr. W. H. R. Rivers to be "cured" and sent back to the Front. Rivers became a good friend and surrogate father figure (Sassoon's own father left the family when Sassoon was five and died when he was nine).

On the other hand, Owen was a case of neurasthenia, or "shell shock." Owen's doctor, Arthur Brock, encouraged him to confront his wartime experiences rather than bury them and try to forget.<sup>7</sup> The result was that Sassoon was perfectly poised to stimulate Owen towards writing the realistic anti-war verse Owen would become famous for,

and Owen was in the ideal frame of mind to accept this stimulation.

Owen had read *The Old Huntsman*, and on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1917 he wrote to his mother, with whom he corresponded regularly, "I have just been reading Siegfried Sassoon, and am feeling at a very high pitch of emotion. Nothing like his trench life sketches has ever been written or ever will be written... I have not yet dared to go up to him and parley in a casual way."<sup>8</sup>

Owen took two weeks to muster up the courage to walk over to Sassoon's room armed with several copies of *The Old Huntsman*. "There was a gentle knock on the door of my room and a young officer entered," Sassoon remembered, "Short, dark-haired, and shyly hesitant, he stood for a moment before coming across to the window, where I was sitting on my bed cleaning my golf clubs."<sup>9</sup>

This is the story of a friendship. More importantly, it is the story of a friendship that left behind a testament that has become increasingly relevant.



*Figure 4. Craiglockhart Hydropathical (War Hospital) where Owen and Sassoon met in August 1917. The building erected as a hydropathical hotel outside Edinburg 1877-1880, was converted in 1916 for use as a war hospital in which Dr W H R Rivers treated shell-shocked soldiers World War 1. Sassoon and Owen were both patients. Owen left Craiglockhart in early November, with almost exactly a year left to live. Photo and text by Hector MacQueen, used with permission.*

## Chapter 1 “An Event Worth a Letter”

*S*hyly, Owen asked if Sassoon would be kind enough to autograph some copies of *The Old Huntsman* for himself and his friends. Sassoon seemed to like the younger man instantly, recalling that “He had a charming honest smile, and his manners... were modest and ingratiating”<sup>10</sup> and that he displayed “reticent intelligence.”<sup>11</sup> Sassoon believed that they must have spoken mainly about the *Huntsman* and the messages it propagated about the war. Only when Owen was leaving did he mention that he wrote poetry himself, although he had not published anything. Sassoon appeared to have enjoyed the visit, but not thought much more of Owen at the time. He owned that Owen was “interesting” but not “remarkable”- just another ordinary young man. “It amuses me to remember that... I wondered whether his poems

were any good!" Sassoon remembered in his autobiography.<sup>12</sup> Such recollections would have amused him indeed, given Owen's subsequent fame.

Owen's reaction could not have been in greater contrast. "At last I have an event worth a letter," he wrote rapturously to his cousin, Leslie Gunston,<sup>13</sup> "I have beknown myself to Siegfried Sassoon." On the same day (22<sup>nd</sup> August 1917) he wrote to his mother, Susan, describing his meeting with Sassoon as "the most momentous news I have for you."<sup>14</sup>





stately, with a fine firm chisel'd (how's that?) head... He himself is 30! Looks under 25!" The exhilarated exclamations and the elaborately figurative descriptions reveal an unabashed thrill.

The letter to Gunston also includes The Dead-Beat, a poem that Owen had attempted to write "in Sassoon's style":

The Dead-Beat (True – in the incidental)<sup>15</sup>

*He dropped, more sullenly, than wearily,  
Became a lump of stench, a clot of meat,  
And none of us could kick him to his feet.  
He blinked at my revolver, blearily.*

*He didn't seem to know a war was on,  
Or see or smell the bloody trench at all...  
Perhaps he saw the crowd at Caxton Hall,  
And that is why the fellow's pluck's all gone –*

*Not that the Kaiser frowns imperially  
He sees his wife, how cosily she chats;  
Not his blue pal there, feeding fifty rats.  
Hotels he sees, improved materially:*

*Where ministers smile ministerially:  
Sees Punch still grinning at the Belcher bloke;  
Bairnsfather, enlarging on his little joke,  
While Belloc prophesies of last year, serially.*

*We sent him down at last, he seemed so bad,  
Although a strongish chap and quite unhurt.  
Next day I heard the Doc's fat laugh: "That dirt  
You sent me down last night's just died. So glad!"*

His imitation of Sassoon's style is quite obvious, with its frequent colloquialisms ("fellow", "chap", "bloke", "bloody" etc.) and plainspoken, satirical language. However, it is also obvious why Sassoon's criticism lead to the conclusion that the poem was "no good." Though the poem seems Sassoonish on the surface, it fails to produce the passionate bitterness that was characteristic of Sassoon's work. The direct colloquial language makes the poem seem elementary rather than compliment the subject matter. "The facetious bit" in the middle in which Owen attempts to satirize the ministers and home front complacency towards the war is weak, lacking the power of Sassoon's embittered condemnation. Although the revised version is a considerable improvement, it lacks the power of Owen's better works. In order to develop the verse for which Owen would become famous, he would have to combine Sassoon's philosophy of writing "with

compassionate and challenging realism”<sup>16</sup> with his own technically complex style.

Sassoon did, however, applaud some of the other works Owen subsequently showed him, including a poem called *Antaeus*, based on the Greek mythological figure and a lyric named “Song of Songs.” Later in life, Sassoon was relieved that he had praised those poems, as he feared he had been a little slow to recognize Owen’s gift- “I was sometimes a little severe on what he showed me, censuring the over-luscious writing in his immature pieces... There was an almost embarrassing sweetness in the sentiment of some of his work.” Sassoon points to the phrase “She dreams of golden gardens and sweet gloams” as an example. Though the “emotional element” needed improvement, Sassoon noted that Owen got rid of the problem over the next year.<sup>17</sup>

By the end the letter to Gunston, Owen seemed to belatedly realize that he had been gushing, and humourously remarked, “You’ll have had enough of Sassoon- what?” He recounts their thoughts on a phrase in a letter H. G. Wells had sent to Sassoon, and closes with

“Cheero! I'm well enough by day, and generally so by night. A better mode of life than this present I could not practically manage.” This cheerful goodbye is an appropriate prelude to the friendship that was to follow.

## Chapter 2 “Poet’s Progress”

*S*o how much influence did Siegfried Sassoon really have on Wilfred Owen? According to Owen, a profound deal. According to Sassoon, not as much as is usually assumed.<sup>18</sup> Dominic Hibberd notes that the poems “The Dead-Beat,” “Anthem for Doomed Youth,” “Dulce et Decorum est” and “Disabled,” all written during the Craiglockhart period, distinctly bear the mark of Sassoon’s influence,<sup>19</sup> and it is worth noting that two of the most famous Owen poems (“Anthem” and “Dulce”) are among them. Owen’s first tentative experiment with Sassoon’s style in “The Dead-Beat” didn’t turn out particularly well, but it was now time to buckle down to some serious writing, Sassoon having advised him to “sweat your guts out writing poetry.”<sup>20</sup> Soon, Susan began to receive

requests for her to send drafts of his work. "Some of these verses will light my cigarettes, one or two may light the darkness of the world," he mused in a 7<sup>th</sup> September 1917 letter.<sup>21</sup> "One or two" turns out to be a modest understatement.

Around October 1917, Owen brought Sassoon a sonnet that struck the latter so much that "it dawned on me that my little friend was much more than the promising minor poet that I had hitherto judged him to be."<sup>22</sup> Despite this favourable first impression, the sonnet needed considerable reworking until it became a masterpiece:

## Anthem for Dead Youth<sup>23</sup>

*What minute bells for those who die so fast?  
- Only the monstrous/solemn anger of our guns  
Let the majestic insults of their mouths  
Be as priest words of their burials  
Of choristers and holy music, none;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the wail  
The long drawn wail of high far-sailing shells  
What candles may we hold for these lost? souls?  
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes  
Shall many candles shine; and I will light them  
Women's wide-spreaded arms shall be their wreaths  
And pallor of girls' cheeks shall be their palls  
Their flowers, the tenderness of (writing slightly  
obscured) minds  
And every Dusk, a drawing-down of blinds.*

Sassoon states that he “suggested one or two slight alterations”<sup>24</sup> but Anthem’s first draft reveals Sassoon’s penciled amendments scrawled all over it together with corrections by Owen. For instance, “Passing” has been substituted for “minute,” while the pompous “solemn” was crossed out in favour of the more emotive and starkly fearsome “monstrous.” The propagandistic “our guns” became a more objective “the guns.” A rather grandiose “majestic insults” was hardened and blunted into “blind insolence.” “High far-sailing shells” became a more doleful “lonely sailing shells.” Not all the amendments made it to

the final draft, but Sassoon's influence is clearly visible in both the first and final drafts. The tendencies towards romantic language could have easily turned the poem into a patriotic, pro-war piece.<sup>25</sup> Sassoon attempted to remove some of the partisan language (altering "our" to "the" to make the tragedy more universal rather than just a British grievance) and gave preference to more starkly realistic language. It was Sassoon who suggested the title, recommending "doomed," with its connotations of hopelessness and finality, instead of the more abrupt "dead."

Anthem underwent about seven drafts<sup>26</sup> before it was produced in its final form:

*What passing-bells for these who die as cattle?  
---Only the monstrous anger of the guns.  
Only the stuttering rifles' rapid rattle  
Can patter out their hasty orisons.  
No mockeries now for them; no prayers nor bells;  
Nor any voice of mourning save the choirs,---  
The shrill, demented choirs of wailing shells;  
And bugles calling for them from sad shires.*



*What candles may be held to speed them all?  
Not in the hands of boys but in their eyes  
Shall shine the holy glimmers of goodbyes.  
The pallor of girls' brows shall be their pall;  
Their flowers the tenderness of patient minds,  
And each slow dusk a drawing-down of blinds.*<sup>27</sup>

The metaphor of cattle suggests a terrible disregard for and waste of life. The staccato, clipped alliteration of “the stuttering rifles’ rapid rattle” is typical of Owen’s extensive experimentation with sound. Sassoon noted that Owen “had an exceptionally sensitive ear... Sounds and colours, in his verse, were mulled and modulated to a subdued magnificence of sensuous harmonies.”<sup>28</sup> The poem has an almost unreal atmosphere, and Owen’s narrative voice seems to float above the carnage, sorrowing over the death he witnesses. This type of omniscient voice developed and would pervade many of his following war poems. However, despite Sassoon’s amendments and Owen’s redrafting, the poem still retained its romantic edge,<sup>29</sup> and if one takes the poem in isolation and assumes that it was the only work Owen ever wrote, one might see Owen as less of a realistic war poet than he is seen today. However, Owen’s views developed over time, and his following poem, “Dulce et Decorum est”, is radically different.

As the two poets collaborated, they grew closer. They became friends. And to Owen, more than friends. Dominic Hibberd asserts that Owen “was in love, although it was love mixed with a good deal of hero-worship.”<sup>30</sup> His descriptions of his time with Sassoon in his letters to his mother contain a prominent note of blissful exuberance and excitement. After an evening with his mentor, he states, “No wonder I was happy last night, and that tonight I must get it off my chest before I sleep<sup>31</sup>.” Sassoon biographer Jean Moorcroft Wilson also noted Owen’s tendency to replay their first meeting in his head, the way lovers often do.<sup>32</sup> A 27<sup>th</sup> November 1917 letter to Sassoon reads, “We have had some strong sunshine; and when it strikes anything blue I see you sitting by the bedside as on That Morning in August.”<sup>33</sup> “That” and “Morning” are tellingly capitalized. In a 12<sup>th</sup> September 1917 letter to his mother, he responds to her questions about their relationship by replying that he liked Sassoon as a man, a friend and a poet.<sup>34</sup> He describes Sassoon a friend who “intensely sympathetic with me about every vital question on the planet or off it.” Owen may also have had to dispel doubts about a potential sexual attraction in their friendship, for he has firmly circled the sentence “Let it be thoroughly understood that I nourish no admiration for his

nose or any other feature whatsoever.” A debatable statement, given that Owen had already expressed appreciation for Sassoon’s handsomeness. But, despite their close filial relationship, he couldn’t possibly reveal such a love to his mother. As homosexuals in a society that treated homosexuality as a vice, both Sassoon and Owen could not afford to be too open about their sexuality. Though Sassoon had somewhat accepted his sexuality, he would embark on his first physical relationship only after the end of the war.<sup>35</sup> Their shared sexual orientation and their resultant feelings of being outcast probably brought them closer as well, and allowed a degree of greater openness between them.<sup>36</sup>

However, it is unlikely that the two poets engaged in a romantic relationship. Owen waited until after his departure from Craiglockhart to make his feelings explicit to Sassoon. In addition, Sassoon, though fond of Owen, showed no signs of being in love with him. He referred to Owen as “my little friend”<sup>37</sup> and “a very lovable creature,”<sup>38</sup> all slightly patronizing endearments which display the affection of a mentor for his protégé, or an elder brother for a younger one. He appreciated Owen’s selflessness and tolerance of his own eccentricities,<sup>39</sup> as well as the deep compassion

which is evident in his war poetry,<sup>40</sup> but his description of Owen in his memoir *Siegfried's Journey*, while affectionate, lacks the emotional intensity suggestive of sexual attraction.

Furthermore, although Owen did not impact Sassoon's poetry the same way Sassoon had impacted his, Owen became an important support to his hero in both a literary and emotional sense, an often-neglected fact. In a 7<sup>th</sup> September 1917 letter to Susan, Owen recounts Sassoon reading some of his latest works to him. Owen listened to the words, enraptured and awed, calling one piece "the most exquisitely painful war poem from any language or time."<sup>41</sup> Despite this mode of respectful worship, Owen did offer feedback and the advice was duly noted. "I simply sit tight and tell him where I think he goes wrong, " he wrote, "He is going to alter one passage of this very poem for me."<sup>42</sup> Owen was also editor of *The Hydra*, the hospital magazine, and Sassoon's sonnet *Dreamers* was printed for the first time there, "inaugurating a career of frequent quotation and reprinting,"<sup>43</sup> in Sassoon's words. Sassoon also persuaded Owen to print "Song of Songs" in *The Hydra*.<sup>44</sup>

Moreover, as the months slipped into October, Sassoon was growing increasingly unhappy and divided in his stance towards the war. As he wrestled with what to do, Owen's constant visits to his room were a welcome relief. He recalls Owen as lending "gentle and intuitive support, tiding over inevitable moods of bitterness and depression."<sup>45</sup> Sassoon was also hard at work on the poems that would be published in the book *Counter-Attack and Other Poems*, and Owen's "praises heartened and helped me."<sup>46</sup> Sassoon further recounts that "It was then that we vowed our confederacy to unmask the ugly face of Mars [the Roman God of war],"<sup>47</sup> and this common aim would have stimulated and encouraged both poets. He deeply appreciated Owen's companionship, writing in a 19<sup>th</sup> June 1918 letter to fellow poet Robert Nichols, "Dear little Wilfred... have you seen him yet? Craiglockhart gave me two friends, he and Rivers, whom I adore."<sup>48</sup>

After *Anthem*, Owen went on to produce the famous *Dulce et Decorum est*. Including a nightmarish description of a long march which is suddenly interrupted by a horrific gas attack, the poem's bitter assault against the glorification of war again displays Sassoon's influence, especially the angry, accusatory last lines:

*My friend, you would not tell with such high zest  
To children ardent for some desperate glory,  
The old Lie: Dulce et decorum est  
Pro patria mori.*<sup>49</sup>

The final Latin phrase, from which the ironic title is taken, translates: "It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country." Some drafts of the poem were addressed specifically to Jessie Pope, a writer of jingoistic, patriotic verse. However, the dedication was later altered and does not appear in the final, published poem, and the accusation can be read as a condemnation of all those who presented war as gloriously patriotic. This accusation had also been leveled by Sassoon in his Declaration, against the "callous complacency" of those who called for the continuation of the war with no inkling of the suffering of the troops. Sassoon's *Suicide in the Trenches* (published in *Counter-Attack* in 1918) also concludes with a stinging retort against the "smug-faced crowds with kindling eye/Who cheer when soldier lads march by," taunting them to "Sneak home and pray you'll never know/ The hell where youth and laughter go."

Additionally, *Dulce et Decorum est's* vivid portrayals of war, such as "coughing like hags," "All went lame, all

blind,” and later the more gruesome descriptions of the gas victim- (“ white eyes writhing in his face,” “the froth-corrupted lungs”) all represent a move towards the “compassionate and challenging realism”<sup>50</sup> and “the humanized reportings of front-line episodes”<sup>51</sup> Sassoon advocated. However, Owen has matured since *The Dead-Beat*, and instead of slavishly copying Sassoon’s style, he has blended his own descriptive talents with the ideas Sassoon had influenced him with (Sassoon called his own technique “almost elementary” compared to Owen’s). <sup>52</sup>

*Dulce et Decorum est* was written in early October, and was followed by *Disabled* towards the middle of that month. Like *Dulce*, *Disabled* focuses on the futility of war, and the suffering and waste of life it engenders. It describes the predicament of a young, disabled soldier, as he reflects on his prewar and postwar life. Unlike the fiery compassion of *Dulce*, *Disabled*’s tone is almost eerily quiet and contemplative. Through his disability, the soldier has been made an outsider, a “queer disease” to whom “voices of play and pleasure” are “saddening like a hymn.” Its cleverly woven colours of grey and blue heighten this atmosphere of gloom. It is this powerful sense of ostracism that renders the poem so potent, as the soldier is

distanced from the society he, ironically, fought on behalf of. While the “humanized reporting” element remains a link with Sassoon’s influence, we barely see any trace of Sassoon’s voice, which was so prominent in *The Dead Beat* and *Dulce*. The voice is quiet and contemplative, but poses forceful questions about the cost of war that are uncomfortable to answer but impossible to ignore. Sassoon’s bitterness often prompts anger at the injustice, but many of Owen’s poems have a feeling of profound sadness at the waste, which is also prominent in *Anthem*. Little by little, Owen’s distinctive voice emerged.

Sassoon showed the poem to Robert Graves, whom Owen had met when the former came to Craiglockhart to visit Sassoon. Graves wrote enthusiastically to its author, “Do you know, Owen, that's a damn fine poem of yours, that 'Disabled.' Really damn fine!” Graves was so impressed with the work that he added “I have no doubt at all that if you turned seriously to writing, you could obtain Parnassus in no time while I'm still struggling on the knees of that stubborn peak.”<sup>53</sup>



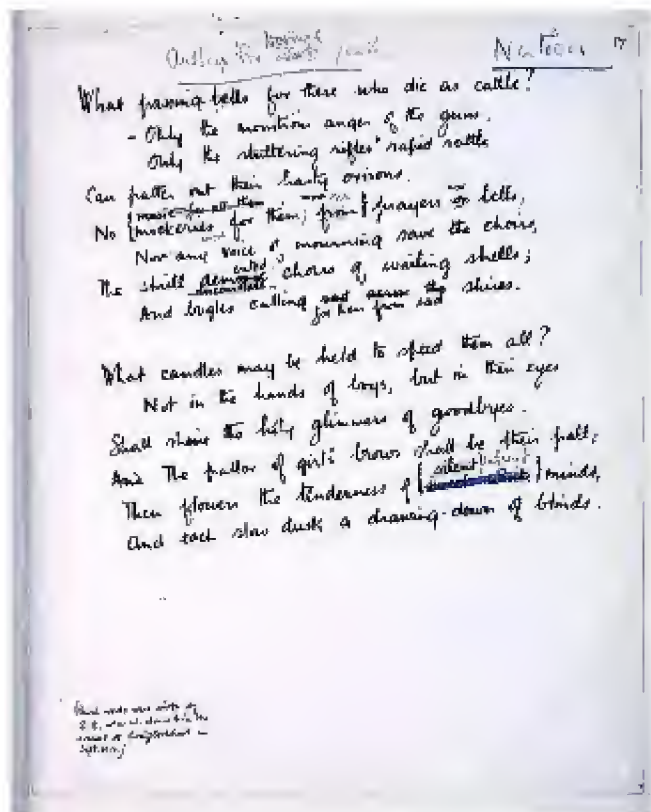


Figure 6. Original manuscript of Owen's "Anthem for Doomed Youth", showing Sassoon's revisions. This item is from The First World War Poetry Digital Archive, University of Oxford ([www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit](http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit)); © The British Library / The Wilfred Owen Literary Estate. Republished under the terms of "permitted use"

### Chapter 3 “The Floor is Crossed”<sup>54</sup>

*S*adly, however, Owen’s Craiglockhart days were drawing to a close. By early November, he would be gone, and Sassoon would follow a few weeks later, having finally decided to relinquish the protest. By October, he was wrestling with guilt at staying safely at Craiglockhart while people he knew and cared about were facing death at the Front. His discomfort prompted the poems *Banishment* and *Sick Leave*, and biographer Wilson believes that Owen’s influence is apparent in *Sick Leave*.

55

## Sick Leave<sup>56</sup>

*When I'm asleep, dreaming and lulled and warm,—  
They come, the homeless ones, the noiseless dead.  
While the dim charging breakers of the storm  
Bellow and drone and rumble overhead,  
Out of the gloom they gather about my bed.  
They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine.  
'Why are you here with all your watches ended?  
From Ypres to Frise we sought you in the Line.'  
In bitter safety I awake, unfriended;  
And while the dawn begins with slashing rain  
I think of the Battalion in the mud.  
'When are you going out to them again?  
Are they not still your brothers through our blood?'*

Sassoon's tormented feelings are obvious. Although he feels "lulled and warm," his safety is "bitter" and has cost him friendships he values. The rhetorical questions posed to him by his men in his dreams are not fiercely accusatory, but disappointed and sad with a note of betrayal. The line "They whisper to my heart; their thoughts are mine" indicates that Sassoon too believed that he had let his men down by leaving them, though ironically, his protest stemmed from compassion for them. The Owenish elements appear in the quiet, gloomy atmosphere, complete with the eerie "dim charging breakers of the

storm.” These elements also appear in the soft alliteration (“gloom they gather” and “drone and rumble” for instance).

It was a catch-22 situation. Sassoon finally concluded: “Going back was the only way out of an impossible situation. At the front I should at least find forgetfulness. And I would rather be killed than survive as one who had “wangled” his way through by saying that the War ought to stop.”<sup>57</sup> He agreed to return, but deliberately skipped his Medical Board. In later life, he called it “a very stupid thing,”<sup>58</sup> and felt unable to offer a plausible explanation for his actions. Why? Was Sassoon still indecisive? He was torn, yes, but he assured a disappointed and angry Dr. Rivers afterwards that he still wanted to go back. He remembers that waiting had delayed him for tea with an acquaintance, and Wilson suggests that he left in a pique at being made to wait too long.<sup>59</sup> About a week after this incident, on 30<sup>th</sup> October, Owen’s Board met and discharged him with three weeks’ leave. He had to leave the Hospital on the same day.<sup>60</sup>

According to Sassoon’s memoirs, the two friends spent their last evening together on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1917 at the Scottish Conservative Club, where Sassoon was an

honorary member. After some dinner and Burgundy, Sassoon pulled out a book of excessively elaborate verse (A Human View by Alymer Strong) given to him by the author, and began to entertain Owen with its ridiculous phrases:

*O is it true I have become/ this gourd, this gothic  
vacuum?*

Owen shook with spasms of laughter, and Sassoon laughed until he was incapable of continuing. Only a dignified looking gentleman reading The Scotsman observed them, and Sassoon supposed he may have envied them, or been refreshed by their gaiety. Sassoon musingly recalled later that their merriment seemed out of place, as Owen would be killed exactly a year later, on the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> November 1918. Before Sassoon left to return to the hospital, he gave Owen a letter of introduction to Robert Ross, Sassoon's patron and close friend, for Owen had no literary connections in London.<sup>61</sup> The envelope also contained a ten-pound note and a few lines from Sassoon telling him to enjoy his leave.<sup>62</sup>

After their parting, Owen boarded the midnight train to London, and headed home.



*Figure 7. The Scottish Conservative Club, Edinburgh (c. 1890) where Owen and Sassoon spent their last evening together on 3<sup>rd</sup> November 1917. University of Toronto/Internet Archives/[www.victorianweb.org/](http://www.victorianweb.org/). URL: <http://www.victorianweb.org/art/architecture/clubs/18.html>*

## Chapter 4 Creativity and “Counter-Attack”<sup>63</sup>

*A*t home in Mahim, on the fifth of November, Owen lost no time in writing to Sassoon. There was a lot to be said that he had left unsaid at Craiglockhart, and now was the time to tell all:

*“Know that since mid-September, when you still regarded me as a tiresome little knocker on your door, I held you as Keats + Christ + Elijah + my Colonel + my father-confessor + Amenophis IV in profile.*

*What’s that mathematically?*

*In effect it is this: that I love you, dispassionately, so much, so very much, dear Fellow, that the blasting little smile you wear on reading this can’t hurt me in the least.”*<sup>64</sup>

The seriousness of the letter is thinly disguised by whimsicality through the plus signs, the playful rhetorical question and the colloquial “Fellow” and “blasting.” In other

parts of the letter, he uses absurd phrases from A Human View such as “Smile the penny!”<sup>65</sup> However, rather than detract from the fervency of his feelings, the witticisms add to them as Owen seems to vacillate between the need to express himself and discomfort at revealing so much. The earnest “I love you” reads as a release of about two months’ worth of pent up emotion, and the almost comic juxtaposition of “dispassionately” with the repeated “so much” serves to highlight the strength of the feeling. The vivid cosmic imagery that follows- “I spun round you a satellite for a month, but I shall swing out soon, a dark star in the orbit where you will blaze”<sup>66</sup>- hints at the same exhilarating feeling. Moreover, although Owen saw himself as a “dark star” to Sassoon’s “blaze,” the fact that he wrote of himself swinging out on his own shows a sense of newfound independence and restored self-confidence.

No doubt that Sassoon would have been greatly discomforted by the letter. A reserved man by nature (Owen wished that he “were less undemonstrative”<sup>67</sup>) this soul bearing would hardly have been welcome, and it is notable that Sassoon later destroyed some of Owen’s letters, which would probably have revealed some very personal emotions.<sup>68</sup>



Meanwhile, Sassoon's letter of introduction to Robert Ross was coming in handy. On 27<sup>th</sup> November, Owen wrote to his friend that he "had a Third Heaven of a time in London" and that "R. R. gave me a glorified morning at the Reform, and evening at Half Moon Street."<sup>69</sup> Not only did he meet Ross, but was introduced to writers such as Arnold Bennett and H. G. Wells. Owen enjoyed Ross' hospitality, and felt encouraged by all the attention he was receiving. "Fame is the recognition of one's peers,"<sup>70</sup> he wrote to Susan on a later date, rejoicing in his friendship with Sassoon and Graves. By the time of Owen's letter about Ross, he and Sassoon were close enough to address each other as Wilfred and Siegfried rather than by surname.<sup>71</sup> Around the time of this letter, Sassoon was passed fit for service abroad.<sup>72</sup> Owen, having completed his three weeks' leave, was stationed in Scarborough.

The poems Owen wrote in the last year of his life were his best and most independent. With *Disabled*, he seemed to have distinctly established an Owen-esque voice of his own. It was a voice that can be generally categorized as quiet yet powerful, unobtrusive yet dominant, and observant with a sharp awareness of the senses. Sassoon noted a "slowness and sobriety" in his method," <sup>73</sup> which

contributed to the power of the poems as the impact is slowly allowed to sink into the reader. The poem Exposure is a typical illustration of these characteristics:

*Our brains ache, in the merciless iced cast winds that  
knife us...  
Wearied we keep awake because the night is silent...  
Low, drooping flares confuse our memory of the  
salient...  
Worried by silence, sentries whisper, curious, nervous,  
But nothing happens.*

*Watching, we hear the mad gusts tugging on the wire,  
Like twitching agonies of men among its brambles.  
Northward, incessantly, the flickering gunnery rumbles,  
Far off, like a dull rumour of some other war.  
What are we doing here?*

*The poignant misery of dawn begins to grow...  
We only know war lasts, rain soaks, and clouds sag  
stormy.  
Dawn massing in the east her melancholy army  
Attacks once more in ranks on shivering ranks of grey,  
But nothing happens.*

*Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence.  
Less deathly than the air that shudders black with snow,  
With sidelong flowing flakes that flock, pause, and  
renew;  
We watch them wandering up and down the wind's  
nonchalance,  
But nothing happens.*

*Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our  
faces---  
We cringe in holes, back on forgotten dreams, and stare,  
snow-dazed,  
Deep into grassier ditches. So we drowse, sun-dozed,  
Littered with blossoms trickling where the blackbird  
fusses,  
---Is it that we are dying?*

*Slowly our ghosts drag home: glimpsing the sunk fires,  
glozed  
With crusted dark-red jewels; crickets jingle there;  
For hours the innocent mice rejoice: the house is theirs;  
Shutters and doors, all closed: on us the doors are  
closed,---  
We turn back to our dying.*

*Since we believe not otherwise can kind fires burn;  
Nor ever suns smile true on child, or field, or fruit.  
For God's invincible spring our love is made afraid;  
Therefore, not loath, we lie out here; therefore were  
born,  
For love of God seems dying.*

*Tonight, this frost will fasten on this mud and us,  
Shrivelling many hands, puckering foreheads crisp.  
The burying-party, picks and shovels in shaking grasp,  
Pause over half-known faces. All their eyes are ice,  
But nothing happens.<sup>74</sup>*

The pace is slow, allowing the impact to seep slowly but surely into the reader without being excessively forceful. The poem successfully employs both tactile and auditory

senses- “merciless iced east winds that knife us” evokes chilly, biting cold. The sibilance of “Sudden successive flights of bullets streak the silence” creates an eerie and ominous sound. The poem also seems to take place in an otherworldly, semi-conscious state, as “Low drooping flares confuse our memory of the salient” and “back on forgotten dreams, and stare, snow-dazed” suggest. This prompts a ghostly feeling of slowly and unknowingly succumbing to the cold. The refrain “But nothing happens” reinforces this deathly atmosphere as the soldiers suffer and fade in silence. Owen did, however, produce more Sassoon-like works, such as *Conscious* in early 1918 (which if the poet’s name is hidden, can easily be mistaken for a Sassoon work) and later *Smile, Smile, Smile*, showing the lingering influence of his mentor. However, they are not awkward, like *The Dead Beat*, a result of Owen’s growing proficiency.

*Conscious*<sup>75</sup>

*His fingers wake, and flutter; up the bed.  
His eyes come open with a pull of will,  
Helped by the yellow mayflowers by his head.  
The blind-cord drawls across the window-sill...  
What a smooth floor the ward has! What a rug!*

*Who is that talking somewhere out of sight?  
Three flies are creeping round the shiny jug...  
'Nurse! Doctor!'---'Yes, all right, all right.'*

*But sudden evening blurs and fogs the air.  
There seems no time to want a drink of water.  
Nurse looks so far away. And here and there  
Music and roses burst through crimson slaughter.  
He can't remember where he saw blue sky...  
The trench is narrower. Cold, he's cold; yet hot---  
And there's no light to see the voices by...  
There is no time to ask...he knows not what.*

The poem's urgent rapidity, which is reinforced by the tightly controlled rhyme scheme and brief sentences, is typical of Sassoon. Descriptions and setting are sparse, limited to briefly noting the flowers on the windowsill, the blind cord, the floor, the rug and jug. Here, it helps to convey the soldier's agitated, bewildered confusion as he drifts in and out of consciousness in a hospital, with time only to notice the most basic details. The exclamations in direct speech and colloquial language ("Nurse! Doctor!"-"Yes; all right, all right") are also links with Sassoon.

In May 1918, Sassoon's second volume of war poetry, *Counter Attack and Other Poems*, was released. Although already a writer of satirical verse, *Counter Attack* was far more aggressive and bitter than *The Old Huntsman*, as

those from the High Command (The General) to the civilians at home (The Fathers, Glory of Women) became targets of his sharp pen. The biting Does It Matter is typical of the kind of verse found in Counter-Attack:

*Does it matter?-losing your legs?...  
For people will always be kind,  
And you need not show that you mind  
When the others come in after hunting  
To gobble their muffins and eggs.*

*Does it matter ?-losing your sight?...  
There's such splendid work for the blind;  
And people will always be kind,  
As you sit on the terrace remembering  
And turning your face to the light.*

*Do they matter?-those dreams from the pit?...  
You can drink and forget and be glad,  
And people won't say that you're mad;  
For they'll know you've fought for your country  
And no one will worry a bit.<sup>76</sup>*

The biting, repeated question, “Does It Matter?” almost dares the reader to say the unspoken “no” in the face of the obvious “yes.” The disabled soldier’s predicaments grow worse, from loss of limbs to loss of vision to finally traumatic memories of the trenches. The target of Sassoon’s satire is the complacent civilian population,

who, despite being “kind,” almost nonchalantly dismiss the suffering experienced by the soldier.



*Figure 8. Counter-attack, and Other Poems / by Siegfried Sassoon ... ; with an introduction by Robert Nichols. -- New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., <1920, c1918>. Source: [http://net.lib.byu.edu/english/WWI/poets/CounterAttack\(big\).html](http://net.lib.byu.edu/english/WWI/poets/CounterAttack(big).html) (Not verifiable)*

The same month saw Sassoon finally back in France, as he had wanted, after some time in Palestine. His final month in France became the basis for more poems, such as *I Stood With the Dead* and *The Dug Out*. But in July 1918, he was wounded in the head by friendly fire and sent back to England. Recuperating at Lancaster Gate hospital he felt deeply divided and unhappy, feeling as though he didn't belong at home and ought to be back at the front with his men, and a long stream of visitors only made his nerves worse. "My war had stopped, but its after-effects

were still with me... I saw myself as one who had achieved nothing except an idiotic anti-climax... Why hadn't I stayed in France where I could at least escape from the War by being in it? Out there I had never despised my existence as I did now," he remembered.<sup>77</sup> Visits from Dr. Rivers helped soothe him, and by the beginning of August he began to feel somewhat better. He did manage to write, and produced "eight vigil haunted lines,"<sup>78</sup> i.e. *The Dugout*, based on a description of one of his men sleeping. The soldier looked so death-like that the narrator shakes him to make sure that he is alive. Around this time, Sassoon noticed that although he still wished to convey the grim realities of war, he wanted his writing to be more "above the battle" and more impersonal. In doing so, he was "unconsciously... getting nearer to Wilfred Owen's method of approach."<sup>79</sup> For although Owen's poems were based on personal experience and sometimes used "I" and "we," they had an omniscient, detached quality. If we look back at *Exposure* and even *Disabled* and *Anthem for Doomed Youth*, Owen's voice seems to float above the scenes he describes, like a compassionate, all-seeing observer.



An example of his approach can be seen in a May 1918 poem by Sassoon:

## Night on the Convoy<sup>80</sup>

*Out in the blustering darkness, on the deck  
A gleam of stars looks down. Long blurs of black,  
The lean Destroyers, level with our track,  
Plunging and stealing, watch the perilous way  
Through backward racing seas and caverns of chill  
spray.  
One sentry by the davits, in the gloom  
Stands mute: the boat heaves onward through the night.  
Shrouded is every chink of cabined light:  
And sluiced by floundering waves that hiss and boom  
And crash like guns, the troop-ship shudders ... doom.*

*Now something at my feet stirs with a sigh;  
And slowly growing used to groping dark,  
I know that the hurricane-deck, down all its length,  
Is heaped and spread with lads in sprawling strength—  
Blanketed soldiers sleeping. In the stark  
Danger of life at war, they lie so still,  
All prostrate and defenceless, head by head...  
And I remember Arras, and that hill  
Where dumb with pain I stumbled among the dead.*

*We are going home. The troop-ship, in a thrill  
Of fiery-chamber'd anguish, throbs and rolls.  
We are going home ... victims ... three thousand souls.*


The poem uses descriptive language to set the atmosphere, with its depictions of the ominous “blustering darkness” and the eerie “gleam of stars,” an Owen-esque technique that can be seen in many poems such as

Exposure and Strange Meeting, to name but two. The poem has a slower, drawn out pace to allow the quiet deadliness of the destroyers to sink in, unlike the snappy, rapid-fire satires Sassoon usually wrote. This slow pace is reminiscent of the ships' stealthy, menacing movements as it silently but resolutely moves "plunging and stealing." Like Owen, Sassoon has made greater use of the senses, both tactile ("chill spray") and auditory ("hiss and boom.") The final words, "victims... three thousand souls," helps achieve the "above the battle" effect Sassoon wanted. The use of the vast number together with the inclusion of the overall atmosphere moves the tragedy further away from the personal and makes it more universal and large-scale, shifting Sassoon almost out of the poem altogether and making him the kind of compassionate observer present in Owen's narration.

On 26<sup>th</sup> July, Owen heard of Sassoon's injury.<sup>81</sup> Convinced that he was duty bound to take Sassoon's place so that they could continue to report the true suffering of the troops, Owen was resolved to go back. Anyway, the Adjutant-General's department had already marked him for service overseas. Owen asked for his name to be put on the draft.<sup>82</sup> Sassoon confided his unhappiness and guilt at

being safe with a minor wound in a letter to Owen.<sup>83</sup> On 10<sup>th</sup> August 1918 letter to Susan, Owen mentioned, "Siegfried is being moved to Berwick on Tweed next week. Am trying to find which day. Imagine what wretched uncertainty I'm in tonight."<sup>84</sup> Owen and Sassoon were both keen to exploit the opportunity to meet. They finally got their chance on 15<sup>th</sup> August, <sup>85</sup>and met at the house of Osbert Sitwell, their mutual friend, and "spent the whole of a hot cloudless afternoon together."<sup>86</sup> Sitwell arranged for the harpsichordist Mrs. Gordon Woodhouse to give them a private concert, followed by tea and an idyllic walk in the Chelsea Psychic Gardens. Afterwards, Owen walked with Sassoon back to Lancaster Gate. It was their only opportunity for private conversation. They parted on the hospital steps, and never saw each other again.

## Chapter 5 “I Choose Him”

 On “That Morning” in August 1917, Owen shyly told his new friend that “The Death Bed” was his favourite of the poet’s works. Comparing a characteristic Owen poem with The Death Bed, one may guess why that poem especially appealed to Owen. Unlike the usual Sassoon satire, The Death Bed uses a haunting atmosphere, and a slow pace for impact, a style that Owen would come to favor as seen in many of his poems. But on that bright summer day, neither could have guessed that Wilfred Owen, who too was “young” and “hated war” like the dying soldier in the poem would be dead in a little over a year. Yet, Death gave Owen a little more time, and at the time of his parting from Sassoon he had about two to three months left to live. Sassoon was strongly opposed to his returning to France

and even threatened to stab Owen in the leg if it would prevent him.<sup>87</sup> Owen did not tell Sassoon that he was returning to the Front until he had left England, and when they parted at Lancaster Gate, Sassoon was in “deluded ignorance”<sup>88</sup> of the fact that Owen was on his last leave before returning to France. Owen sent him a farewell letter about three weeks after their reunion upon reaching France. “I’m much nearer to you here than in Scarborough, and am by so much happier,” <sup>89</sup>he wrote, reinforcing his wish to continue the role in France Sassoon had been compelled to leave. Sassoon was anxious, but knowing that Owen had really gone to stay, told him it would be “good for his poetry.”<sup>90</sup> The two poets continued to correspond throughout September and October, Owen’s letters addressed affectionately to “Very dear Siegfried” and “Dearest of all Friends.”<sup>91</sup> Owen also sent Sassoon poems from France, including *The Sentry*, *Smile, Smile, Smile*, and a partial draft of *Spring Offensive* with a request for advice on the poem.<sup>92</sup> Sassoon appreciated Owen’s sympathy and wit. With his last letter, Owen enclosed an order forbidding “peace talk,” and upon its issue Owen “held a most glorious brief peace talk in a pill-box.”<sup>93</sup> The same letter, in response to a description by Sassoon of releasing a wren that had perched itself on his pillow,

humourously remarked, "while you are apparently given over to wrens, I have found brave companionship in a poppy, behind whose stalk I took cover from five machine-guns and several howitzers."<sup>94</sup>

In France, Owen was again posted to the Second Manchesters and became involved in the fighting again, such as the Brigade attack on the Beaurevoir-Fonsomme Line at Joncourt in early October.<sup>95</sup> He even received command of a company.<sup>96</sup> Between 30<sup>th</sup> and 31<sup>st</sup> October, the Second Manchesters took over the line west of the Sambre-Oise Canal, near Ors.<sup>97</sup>

On October 31<sup>st</sup> Owen wrote to his mother from the cellar of a forester's house near Ors. Although there was an attack ahead, he seemed content at present: "I hope you are as warm as I am; as serene in your room as I am here; and that you think of me never in bed as resignedly as I think of you always in bed. Of this I am certain you could not be visited by a band of friends half so fine as surround me here."<sup>98</sup>

On the morning of 4<sup>th</sup> November, the Manchesters were set to take the Sambre-Oise Canal. Very soon, they were

met with a barrage of fire, including trench mortars, machine guns, shrapnel and gas.<sup>99</sup> As Dominic Hibberd notes, there are several differing accounts of Owen's death under fire.<sup>100</sup> Susan Owen states that he was hit while helping his men with some planks. Another soldier recounted that Owen had already been on a raft and was attempting to cross the canal. Death chose him, and Wilfred Owen, at the age of just twenty-five, was killed in action. The next day, he was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant.<sup>101</sup> Another three days later, he was awarded the Military Cross.<sup>102</sup> A week after his death, the guns fell silent on the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month, and the First World War came to a close.





*Wilfred Owen Memorial, The Abbey Shrewsbury by Richard  
Breakspear*

## Chapter 6 “The Poetry is in the Pity”<sup>103</sup>

*S*iegfried Sassoon was walking in the meadows below Garsington when the bells of the village church rang out in celebration of the Armistice. His sense of relief was so incredible that he could barely register the idea of the war being over. “I just stood still with a blank mind, listening to the bells which announced our deliverance.”<sup>104</sup> However, during this time of “lively distraction,” he was waiting anxiously for a letter.<sup>105</sup> For word that would never come. He was waiting to hear from Wilfred Owen

Unlike Sassoon, Susan Owen did not have to wait long. The dreaded telegram notifying her of her son’s death

arrived one week later, as the church bells rang out in celebration of the armistice.<sup>106</sup>

When Sassoon eventually learnt of Owen's death some months later, his reaction was a pain almost too awful to bear. "A blank miserable sense of deprivation has dulled my mind whenever I have thought of him... the chasm in my private existence remains,"<sup>107</sup> he wrote. He would never "accept that disappearance philosophically."<sup>108</sup> Owen's memory would linger with and haunt him for the rest of his life.

Meanwhile, even as Sassoon dealt with his grief, there still remained the question of what was to be done about Owen's poetry. He was virtually unknown as a writer and had seen only five poems published in his lifetime.<sup>109</sup> He could very easily fade into obscurity. Edith Sitwell, the sister of Osbert, included some of his work in her anthology *Wheels*. Soon afterwards, she began to compile an anthology of Owen's poems. However, when she contacted Sassoon for assistance, he insisted on taking over the project entirely, saying that it would have been Owen's own wish. Sitwell gave the manuscripts to him, but eventually got her way as Sassoon was compelled to hand

the manuscripts back to her after he departed on a lecture tour in the USA. <sup>110</sup>

About ten years later, Sassoon suggested that Edmund Blunden edit a new collection of Owen's work.<sup>111</sup> Blunden, after all, was a war poet himself and could relate to the project better than Sitwell. But if this was so, couldn't Sassoon have done it himself? Sassoon would have been the ideal editor, having gotten to know Owen's poetry and seen its development more than anybody.

There emerges a very probable reason. Sassoon was too emotionally attached to Owen to undertake the project. He constantly refused to critique Owen's work, feeling that he could never do it impartially. His brief introduction to Sitwell's Owen anthology (published in 1920), includes some of this sentiment:

In writing an Introduction such as this it is good to be brief. The poems printed in this book need no preliminary commendations from me or anyone else. The author has left us his own fragmentary but impressive Foreword; this, and his Poems, can speak for him, backed by the authority of his experience as an infantry soldier, and sustained by

nobility and originality of style. All that was strongest in Wilfred Owen survives in his poems; any superficial impressions of his personality, any records of his conversation, behavior, or appearance, would be irrelevant and unseemly. The curiosity, which demands such morsels, would be incapable of appreciating the richness of his work.

The discussion of his experiments in assonance and dissonance (of which 'Strange Meeting' is the finest example) may be left to the professional critics of verse, the majority of whom will be more preoccupied with such technical details than with the profound humanity of the self-revelation manifested in such magnificent lines as those at the end of his 'Apologia pro Poemate Meo', and in that other poem which he named 'Greater Love'.

The importance of his contribution to the literature of the War cannot be decided by those who, like myself, both admired him as a poet and valued him as a friend. His conclusions about War are so entirely in accordance with my own that I cannot attempt to judge his work with any critical detachment. I can only affirm that he was a man of absolute integrity of mind. He never wrote his poems (as

so many war-poets did) to make the effect of a personal gesture. He pitied others; he did not pity himself. In the last year of his life he attained a clear vision of what he needed to say, and these poems survive him as his true and splendid testament.

Wilfred Owen was born at Oswestry on 18th March 1893. He was educated at the Birkenhead Institute, and matriculated at London University in 1910. In 1913 he obtained a private tutorship near Bordeaux, where he remained until 1915. During this period he became acquainted with the eminent French poet, Laurent Tailhade, to whom he showed his early verses, and from whom he received considerable encouragement. In 1915, in spite of delicate health, he joined the Artists' Rifles O.T.C., was gazetted to the Manchester Regiment, and served with their 2nd Battalion in France from December 1916 to June 1917, when he was invalided home. Fourteen months later he returned to the Western Front and served with the same Battalion, ultimately commanding a Company.

He was awarded the Military Cross for gallantry while taking part in some heavy fighting on 1st October. He was

killed on 4th November 1918, while endeavouring to get his men across the Sambre Canal. A month before his death he wrote to his mother: "My nerves are in perfect order. I came out again in order to help these boys; directly, by leading them as well as an officer can; indirectly, by watching their sufferings that I may speak of them as well as a pleader can." Let his own words be his epitaph:

"Courage was mine, and I had mystery;  
Wisdom was mine, and I had mastery."<sup>112</sup>

The introduction is short, but eloquent. In it, Sassoon captures the essence of Owen without, as he clearly states, critiquing his poetry or providing any excessive study of his character. He dismisses any intimate details, observations and feelings as unnecessary to the introduction, insisting that the poems could speak for themselves. He also believed that his personal involvement with Owen prevented him from analyzing his work with the "critical detachment" that would be necessary.

Meanwhile, Owen's war poetry continued to enjoy posthumous fame. Edmund Blunden's second anthology allowed his work to reach a wider audience, and it gained further prominence during the protest era of the 1960s,<sup>113</sup> where Owen's appeals against the cruelty of war fit hand-in-glove with the ideals of the time. It is a pity that Owen didn't live to see his fame, but his poetry did give him a sort of immortality. Through his compassionate and powerful writing, he gave voice to the "doomed youth" he had so wanted to speak for.



## Chapter 7 “Siegfried’s Journey”<sup>114</sup>

*I*n a letter to Charles Causley, Sassoon once wrote that most people seemed to think he had died in 1919.<sup>115</sup> Which, in a sense, is “true.” None of his post-war poems achieved the acclaim that his war verses had. His autobiographical works do not go beyond 1920. But at the beginning of 1919, Sassoon was thirty-two, still young, with almost fifty years of his long life left to live. He made prominent literary friends, such as Thomas Hardy and fellow war poet Edmund Blunden. In 1919, he published a collection of poems under the title *Picture Show*, which includes but is not restricted to, war verses such as *Aftermath*, which vigorously pushes its readers to “Look down, and swear by the slain of the War that you’ll never forget” in the hope that such suffering would not repeat itself. This was followed by *The Heart’s Journey* in 1928,

and the less successful *Vigils* (1934).<sup>116</sup> Soon after the war, he began his first physical love affair with a soldier named William “Gabriel” Atkins, about ten years his junior. This was followed by a series of love affairs in a quest for emotional fulfillment, from singer/songwriter Ivor Novello and Prince Phillip of Hesse to the actor Glen Byam Shaw and the aristocrat Stephen Tennant. On a literary front, Sassoon began the first of his fictionalized autobiographies, *Memoirs of a Fox Hunting Man*, first published in 1928. The protagonist George Sherston grows up as a naïve, callow youth in the sprawling, Kentish countryside. He isn’t a writer, and is portrayed mostly as a sportsman. The sequel, *Memoirs of an Infantry Officer* (first published in 1930), detailed Sherston’s/ Sassoon’s armed service up to his protest and admission to Craiglockhart (“Slateford” ) War Hospital. The final volume, *Sherston’s Progress*, (first published in 1936) covers his time at Craiglockhart until his return to England after being shot in July 1918. The first chapter is entitled “Rivers” and deals fondly with his relationship with the doctor, but Owen is conspicuously absent. Since Sherston was not a poet, would the inclusion of Owen have been incongruous? Or was Sassoon still too uncomfortable to write about him?



*Figure 10. 'Huntsman Jumping a Fence' What could be more representative or more typical of Siegfried Sassoon than a fox-hunting man? This pen and black ink, watercolour, and body colour drawing is dated 1915 and signed by Sassoon in the lower right hand corner. Text and image by David Gray. Used with permission.*

The “Sherston Trilogy” earned Sassoon critical acclaim as a prose writer. Witty, eloquent and suffused with self-deprecating humour, they have the maturity of an older man looking back on his more impetuous, idealistic, immature younger self. Later in life, Sassoon would produce three volumes of genuine autobiography, *The Old Century*, *The Weald of Youth*, and *Siegfried's Journey*.

Sassoon's last homosexual love affair, with Stephen Tennant, ended turbulently and unhappily. Shortly after this event, in December 1933, he unexpectedly married Hester Gatty, who was much younger than him. They had

a son, George, something that Sassoon had badly wanted for a long time, but unfortunately, the marriage broke down after the Second World War. In 1946, briefly after his separation from his wife, Sassoon published Siegfried's Journey. The book extends two years beyond its fictional counterpart, Sherston's Progress, but unlike in the older book, Sassoon finally detailed his relationship with Wilfred Owen. His account of their friendship is appreciative and moving, but it took Sassoon "an effort of will"<sup>117</sup> to write it. He even refused to transcribe Owen's last two letters to him, saying that it would "cost me many heavy sighs."<sup>118</sup>

It was clear that he deeply missed Owen, even long after their last parting. In 1954, thirty-six years after Owen's death, Sassoon dreamt that his friend had returned, and was overjoyed to be able to look after and guide him again.<sup>119</sup> The following unpublished poem, written in January 1950 and entitled An Incident in Literary History indicates just how much Owen was on Sassoon's mind, as well as Sassoon's unhappiness with his own life. <sup>120</sup>

*Sassoon and Owen - names that found their niche  
In literary history. Owen's dead.  
The other one survived the bullet which  
Toward that War's end just grazed him on the head.  
Yes; his career continued. But of late,*

*His state of mind has made him wonder whether  
Sassoon's continuance was appropriate...  
Should not these soldier poets have died together?*

*For thirty years a person of that name  
Has done his level best to supplement  
The scraps that opportunely earned him fame.  
Yet literature's cold chronicles resent  
The existence of this ghost. He should have kept  
Silence, and out in France forever slept.*

It isn't a particularly good poem, but it reveals a good deal about Sassoon's state of mind. The awkward, wandering lines evoke a sense of weary aimlessness. He seems dissatisfied with the work he produced later in life, feeling that it didn't live up to the war-era "scraps that opportunely earned him fame." The final line of each stanza contains an explicit wish that he had died with Owen in combat.

In the final years of his life, Sassoon converted to Roman Catholicism, which helped him find a measure of spiritual peace. He was also awarded a CBE. He passed away in 1967, one week before his eighty-first birthday.

## Epilogue “Have you forgotten yet?”<sup>121</sup>

*I*n 1982 Stephen MacDonald’s drama *Not About Heroes* premiered at the Edinburgh Film Festival. The title comes from Owen’s “Preface” to his poetry. The story is, of course, the friendship between Sassoon and Owen. Winning a Fringe First Award,<sup>122</sup> the play was a long-running success and still continues to be performed. Featuring only the characters of Sassoon and Owen, MacDonald recreates their friendship with the aid of letters and historical accounts. Pat Barker’s 1992 First World War historical fiction novel *Regeneration* introduced Sassoon as a major character and chronicles his friendship with Owen, including their work on *Anthem For Doomed Youth*. Their friendship has a place in any biography of either

poet, and is detailed in documentaries such as Wilfred Owen: A Remembrance Tale.

This enduring fascination with the Owen-Sassoon tale arises not only from its historical and literary significance, but from its almost storybook like quality, which probably helped its portrayal in fiction. Two soldiers meet in the midst of turmoil and form an intense friendship. Their relationship is, however, tragically brief, as the same war that brings them together divides them, as one is killed and the other is left to confront post-war life and its haunting memories. The range of emotions, from the joy of togetherness and hope to grief and despair make this story the material of a real life war epic. In addition, the friendship has an intrigue that is almost mysterious, probably owing to the fact that there is much that we know but also a great deal that we don't know. We already know that letters from Owen to Sassoon have been destroyed. Just one extant letter from Sassoon to Owen survives.<sup>123</sup> Owen had also instructed his mother to burn a sack of his personal papers in the event of his death, which she did.<sup>124</sup> It is difficult, if not impossible, to ever know what went in that sack.

However, the greatest and most lasting testament to their friendship is, of course, their poetry, as we see their common aim and the overlapping and blending of technique so cleverly that some poems of one may be mistaken to be the work of the other. Although each poet largely followed their own way of writing, and maintained their own distinctive method and style, their collaboration did enrich their work.

“Siegfried” means “Victory Peace” and “Wilfred” means “He Who Wants Peace.” And faced with a war that had lost all meaning, they were advocates of an end to a fighting. I have already compared their story to an epic, but although both were decorated soldiers, it is more than an epic of military heroism. It is an epic of compassion, of emotional trials, and ultimately a journey that culminated in the production of war literature that was incredibly striking, and in a world fractured by conflict, ever more pertinent.

The legacy of Owen and Sassoon still endures.



## Abbreviations

GS- Siegfried Sassoon, *The Complete Memoirs of George Sherston* (first published in 1937 by Faber and Faber, this work uses the 1972 Faber and Faber publication)

JMW-Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Siegfried Sassoon: The Making of a War Poet 1886-1918* (first published in 1998 by Gerald Duckworth & Co. Ltd, this work uses the 2002 Duckbacks publication)

PDA- The First World War Poetry Digital Archive

SJ- Siegfried Sassoon, *Siegfried's Journey* (1946)

WONB- Dominic Hibberd, *Wilfred Owen: A New Biography* (2002)

# Notes

<sup>1</sup> *WONB*, pg 280

<sup>2</sup> *SJ*, pg 58

<sup>3</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred\\_Owen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wilfred_Owen), used under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License

<sup>4</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siegfried\\_Sassoon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siegfried_Sassoon), , used under the terms of Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike License

## Introduction

<sup>5</sup> *WONB* blurb, From Wilfred Owen's letter to his mother, 4<sup>th</sup> October 1918

<sup>6</sup> 'They', <http://poemhunter.com/poem/they/> (accessed 19/10/13). Inspired by Robert Ross's reading out loud extracts of a sermon by Arthur Foley Winnington-Ingram, Bishop of London (Source of information- PDA)

<sup>7</sup> *WONB*, pg 254: Brock later noted that in Owen's poems, he "in the most literal sense 'faced the phantoms of the mind'... they still appear in his poetry but he fears them no longer."

<sup>8</sup> *PDA*, Letter to Susan Owen, 15<sup>th</sup> August 1917, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5252?REC=3>

<sup>9</sup> *SJ*, pg 58

## Chapter 1

<sup>10</sup> *SJ*, pg 58

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *PDA*, Letter to Leslie Gunston/ *The Dead Beat*,

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5247?REC=7> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>14</sup> *PDA*, Letter to Susan Owen, 22<sup>nd</sup> August 1917

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5253?REC=4> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>15</sup> *PDA*, Letter to Leslie Gunston/ *The Dead Beat*,

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5247?REC=7> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>16</sup> *SJ* pg 60

## Chapter 2

<sup>17</sup> SJ, pg 59

<sup>18</sup> SJ, pg 60: "the impulse was already strong in him before he had met me... It was indeed one of those situations where imperceptible effects are obtained by people mingling their minds at a favourable moment."

<sup>19</sup> Dominic Hibberd: Owen the Poet, <http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/owen-the-poet> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>20</sup> SJ, pg 59

<sup>21</sup> PDA, Letter to Susan Owen, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1917, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5255?REC=6> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>22</sup> SJ, pg 59

<sup>23</sup> Transcribed from PDA, Anthem for Doomed Youth. Based on the scanned copy of the first draft, I have attempted to piece together what the original poem may have been before the amendments were made. <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/4647?CISOBOX=1&REC=3> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>24</sup> SJ, pg 59-60

<sup>25</sup> WONB, pg 270: "Sassoon realised that the first draft of 'Anthem' could be read as a statement in support of the war."

<sup>26</sup> WONB, pg 269: "putting it through at least seven drafts and repeatedly asking for Sassoon's advice."

<sup>27</sup> PDA, Anthem for Doomed Youth <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3290?CISOBOX=1&REC=8> (accessed 19/10/13)

<sup>28</sup> SJ, pg 62

<sup>29</sup> WONB, pg 269: "'Anthem for Doomed Youth'... is the work of a Romantic, Decadent and still patriotic poet who is just beginning to absorb new ways of thinking."

<sup>30</sup> WONB, pg 275

<sup>31</sup> PDA, Letter to Susan Owen, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1917, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5255?REC=6> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>32</sup> JMW, pg 408, "Certainly, he {Owen} was to regard that first meeting as an epoch in his life, and to replay the scene frequently in his head, as lovers do."

<sup>33</sup> SJ, pg 66

<sup>34</sup> PDA, Letter to Susan Owen, 12<sup>th</sup> September 1917 <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5256?REC=7>

<sup>35</sup> JMW, pg 526, "one of his first decisive acts after the Armistice would be to embark on a passionate physical affair with a soldier eleven years younger than himself."

<sup>36</sup> WONB, pg 268: "Another discovery could not be mentioned in letters home. The two poets would soon have realised they shared the same sexual orientation... Sassoon may well have explained {Edward} Carpenter's ideas about love between men... Wilfred would have recognized an ideal version of himself, and the recognition would have been enormously reassuring."

<sup>37</sup> SJ, pg 59

<sup>38</sup> WONB, pg 282

<sup>39</sup> SJ, pg 61-62: "I remember with affection his amused acceptance of my exclamatory enthusiasms and intolerances."

<sup>40</sup> SJ, pg 61: "his selflessness was extraordinary."

<sup>41</sup> PDA, Letter to Susan Owen, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1917, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5255?REC=6> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>42</sup> Ibid

<sup>43</sup> SJ, pg 61

<sup>44</sup> SJ, pg 61: "it was only through my urgent instigation that he printed a short poem of his own."

<sup>45</sup> SJ, pg 64

<sup>46</sup> Ibid

<sup>47</sup> Ibid

<sup>48</sup> PDA, Letter to Robert Nichols, 19<sup>th</sup> June 1918,

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/9834/9564?REC=1> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>49</sup> PDA, *Dulce et Decorum est*

(<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3303>)

<sup>50</sup> SJ, pg 60

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 3

<sup>53</sup> PDA, Letter from Robert Graves to Wilfred Owen, circa 17<sup>th</sup> October 1917, <http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/education/tutorials/intro/owen/graves.html>

<sup>54</sup> From Wilfred Owen's poem "O World of Many Worlds."

<sup>55</sup> JMW, pg 409: "he experimented with two poems which show the effect Owen was having on his technique." 'Sick Leave' is mentioned as one of the poems.

<sup>56</sup> Sick Leave <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/sick-leave/> (accessed 19/10/13)

<sup>57</sup> GS, pg 549

<sup>58</sup> GS, pg 551

<sup>59</sup> JMW, pg 418

<sup>60</sup> WONB, pg 279

<sup>61</sup> SJ, pg 65: "When saying good-bye I gave him a letter of introduction to Robbie Ross. Wilfred had no literary connections in London, and during the next few months Robbie made him known to various people who were glad to welcome this new and gifted young war poet."

## Chapter 4

<sup>62</sup> WONB, pg 280: "a ten pound note and a characteristic message, 'Why shouldn't you enjoy your leave? Don't mention this again or I'll be very angry. S. S.'"

<sup>63</sup> "Counter Attack" from Siegfried Sassoon's poem "Counter Attack."

<sup>64</sup> WONB, pg 280

<sup>65</sup> Ibid

<sup>66</sup> Ibid

<sup>67</sup> JMW pg 408

<sup>68</sup> WONB, pg 280

<sup>69</sup> SJ, pg 66

<sup>70</sup> PDA, Letter to Susan Owen, 25<sup>th</sup> May 1918,

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5259?REC=9> (accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>71</sup> SJ, pg 65. Owen's letter is addressed to "my dear Siegfried" rather than "my dear Sassoon."

<sup>72</sup> SJ, pg 67: "by the time he wrote, a medical board had passed me fit for service abroad."

<sup>73</sup> SJ, pg 62

<sup>74</sup> PDA, Exposure,

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3306?CISOBOX=1&REC=1> (accessed 19/10/13)

<sup>75</sup> PDA, Conscious

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/item/3300?CISOBOX=1&REC=4> (accessed 19/10/13)

<sup>76</sup> PDA, Siegfried Sassoon: Does it Matter,

<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/education/tutorials/intro/sassoon/does.html> (accessed 19/10/13)

<sup>77</sup> GS, pg 654

<sup>78</sup> SJ, pg 71

<sup>79</sup> Ibid

<sup>80</sup> Night on the Convoy <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/night-on-the-convoy/> (accessed 19/10/13)

<sup>81</sup> WONB, pg 326

<sup>82</sup> WONB, pg 327

<sup>83</sup> Ibid

<sup>84</sup> PDA, *Letter to Susan Owen*, 10<sup>th</sup> August 1918,  
<http://www.oucs.ox.ac.uk/ww1lit/collections/document/5260?REC=10>  
(accessed 09/10/13)

<sup>85</sup> WONB, pg 329

## Chapter 5

<sup>86</sup> SJ, pg 71

<sup>87</sup> WONB pg 329: "Wilfred apparently said something about wanting to go out {to France} again. Sassoon... threatened to stab him in the leg if necessary to stop him going."

<sup>88</sup> SJ, pg 72

<sup>89</sup> WONB, pg 333

<sup>90</sup> SJ, pg 72

<sup>91</sup> Ibid

<sup>92</sup> WONB pg 338-339: "On 22<sup>nd</sup> September Wilfred wrote to Sassoon, enclosing three poems. One was the final version of 'The Sentry'... 'Smile, Smile, Smile,' {and}... a partial draft of 'Spring Offensive.'"

<sup>93</sup> SJ pg 72

<sup>94</sup> SJ pg 73

<sup>95</sup> Phillip Guest: *Chronology*, <http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/chronology>  
(accessed 10/10/13)

<sup>96</sup> WONB, pg 354: "commander of D company with the acting rank of captain."

<sup>97</sup> Phillip Guest: *Chronology*, <http://www.wilfredowen.org.uk/chronology>  
(accessed 10/10/13)

<sup>98</sup> WONB, pg 364

<sup>99</sup> WONB, pg 365: "Very soon the defenders on the east bank opened up with ferocious machine gun and trench motar fire, after a while adding shrapnel and gas."

<sup>100</sup> WONB, pg 365

<sup>101</sup> WONB, pg 366

## Chapter 6

<sup>102</sup> Ibid

<sup>103</sup> From Wilfred Owen's "Preface" to his poems.

<sup>104</sup> SJ pg 97

<sup>105</sup> SJ pg 72

<sup>106</sup> WONB pg 366

<sup>107</sup> SJ pg 72

<sup>108</sup> Ibid

<sup>109</sup> WONB pg 367: “But only five of Wilfred’s poems reached print in his lifetime- ‘Song of Songs’ in ‘The Hydra,’ and ‘The Bookman,’ ‘The Next War’ in ‘The Hydra’ and ‘Miners,’ ‘Futility’ and ‘Hospital Barge’ in ‘The Nation.’”

<sup>110</sup> Stephen Coultier: *Prose and Poetry- Wilfred Owen and his Early Editors*, [http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/owen\\_editors.htm](http://www.firstworldwar.com/poetsandprose/owen_editors.htm) (accessed 10/10/13)

<sup>111</sup> Jean Moorcroft Wilson: *The Hermit of Heytesbury*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview28> (accessed 11/10/13)

<sup>112</sup> Wilfred Owen: *Poems*, pg 2-3, <http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/1034> (accessed 11/10/13)

## Chapter 7

<sup>113</sup> WONB pg 370: “For many years Wilfred was regarded as a fairly minor poet... The 1960s and Vietnam changed all that.”

<sup>114</sup> From Siegfried Sassoon’s autobiography “Siegfried’s Journey”

<sup>115</sup> Jean Moorcroft Wilson: *The Hermit of Heytesbury*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview28> (accessed 11/10/13)

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>117</sup> *SJ*, pg 72

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>119</sup> *JMW* pg 409: “in 1954, he {Sassoon} was to dream that Owen had come back and that he was very ‘happy at his return and taking charge of him.’”

## Epilogue

<sup>120</sup> Jean Moorcroft Wilson: *The Hermit of Heytesbury*, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/mar/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview28> (accessed 11/10/13)

<sup>121</sup> From Siegfried Sassoon’s poem “Aftermath”

<sup>122</sup> Stephen MacDonald (1933-2009), <http://www.doollee.com/PlaywrightsM/macdonald-stephen.html> (accessed 11/10/13)

<sup>123</sup> WONB pg 407, Note 12

<sup>124</sup> WONB, pg 367: “What went into the sack that he instructed Susan to burn... can only be guessed at”

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## Online Resources

Cloutier, S., Prose and Poetry- Wilfred Owen and his Early Editors  
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